



## ART AND CHRISTIANITY SEMINARS ON SACRED ART

The great religious orders:  
St. Benedict (480), St. Dominic (1170), St. Francis (1181)

First of all, it is necessary to define what "religious" means. A person is called religious when, having received a specific vocation, he embraces the religious state, that is, he leaves the world to live outside it and fulfilling the vows that he has made and that define him juridically religious.

Over the centuries there have been many forms of religious orders, from the first monastic orders to the most recent ones that have developed a greater presence in the world.

It should be understood that "being out of the world" is not a physical condition, although for conventual orders this is the usual condition. It is above all a being in the world without being of the world. Living in spite of the world.

All this does not mean that a religious does not care about the world, and especially about those who live in it. All the opposite. But his interest, his living for others takes on a different dimension and different modalities: there are the cloistered nuns (who have no external contact) and who are very important for the life of the Church, but this can only be understood if we look at these orders with an eye that knows how to grasp the deep spirituality and the great effectiveness of prayer.

In Florence there is a place known by everyone as "le Murate", which refers to the nuns who lived in that convent (which later became a prison and later a complex that houses restaurants, social centers, apartments, a parking lot ...). But there are still 7 cloistered monasteries in Florence, and I assure you that they are a reserve of extraordinary spiritual energy for the life of the Church and Christians.

There are also other religious orders that live a conventual life but with a connection with the outside world, and they are currently the majority.

There are therefore Charterhouses, convents, abbeys: all structures that correspond to different charisms.



## **How and when was religious life born?**

We already have a testimony on the life of the first Christians in the acts of the apostles, where the life of the first Christians (2, 42 and 5,12) is narrated. Therefore, the first Christians were people who led a normal life, in no way different from the pagans: the letter to Diognetus is a clear testimony of this.

*V. 1. Christians, neither by region, nor by voice, nor by customs, are to be distinguished from other men. 2. In fact, they do not live in their own cities, nor do they use a different kind of jargon, nor do they lead a special kind of life. 3 Their doctrine is not in the discovery of the thought of multi-faceted men, nor do they adhere to a human philosophical current, as others do. 4. By living in Greek and barbaric cities, as it has happened to everyone, and by adapting to the customs of the place, they bear witness to an admirable and undoubtedly paradoxical method of social life. 5. They live in their own country, but as strangers; they participate in everything as citizens and from everything they are detached as foreigners. Every foreign homeland is their homeland, and every homeland is foreign. 6. They marry like everyone else and generate children, but they do not throw away their newborns. 7. They share the table, but not the bed. 8. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. 9. They dwell in the earth, but have their citizenship in heaven. 10. They obey the established laws, and by their lives they surpass the laws. 11. They love all, and are persecuted by all. 12. They are not known, and they are condemned. They're killed, and they're living again. 13. They are poor, and they make many rich; they lack everything, and they abound in everything. 14. They are despised, and in despise they have glory. They are outraged and proclaimed just. 15. They are insulted and blessed; they are mistreated and honoured. 16. By doing good they are punished as evildoers; condemned they rejoice as if they were receiving life. 17. And they are fought by the Jews as strangers, and by the persecuted Greeks, and those who hate them would not know the cause of their hatred.*



The word monasticism, from the Greek words *monos* (solo) and *oikia* (casa), indicates a particular phenomenon, common to the major religions, whereby some individuals move away from their usual social life to realize their own experience of faith, living every activity of their lives as an act of love towards God.

Those who choose the solitary lifestyle are called **anchorite** monks, those who live in communities are called **cenobitic** monks.

The phenomenon of Christian monasticism **began around 280** in Egypt and Eastern Syria. The most famous monk of this period was **Anthony**, a young Egyptian who soon became an advisor to other anchorites.

A few years later, again in Egypt, the young **Pachomius** began cenobitic monasticism.

In Turkey, around 350, **Basil** founded numerous monasteries following the example of those of Pachomius.

## Western Monasticism

Thanks to **Benedict of Norcia** (480-546), monasticism spread throughout the West. Benedict gave life to a cenobitic monasticism that introduced the novelty of the stability of the monk in the community and in a short time his Rule, admired for its wisdom, balance and discretion, was adopted by many monasteries.

Between the 9th and 12th centuries Benedictine monasticism became the cornerstone of European culture and civilisation.

In 816 Ludovico il Pio, son of Charlemagne, with the help of the French monk Benedetto d'Aniane, had an assembly of abbots adopt the Rule of St. Benedict as the only valid rule for the entire Carolingian empire.

Since then all the abbeys of the empire, male and female, became Benedictine and around them Europe began to rebuild its structure, after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Monasteries and abbeys also represented a great **economic and social phenomenon**: they were responsible for the cultivation and drainage works that recovered large areas of land from agriculture, which had been raised by centuries of neglect.

The monks also developed worship and **culture, liturgy and art**: each monastery has its own scriptorium, where the texts of Christian and pagan authors are transcribed, saving them from destruction, and the precious codices are decorated with splendid miniatures.

The **Rule** consists of 73 chapters, let us take an emblematic one, the one on silence



### Chapter six:

1. *Let us do as the Prophet says: "I have said, I will keep my way, that I may not sin with my tongue; I have put a brake on my mouth, I have become dumb, I have humiliated myself, and I have also kept quiet about good things.*
2. *Now, if the Prophet shows here that from good speeches one must sometimes abstain for the sake of silence, how much more is it necessary to avoid bad words for the pains of sin!*
3. *Therefore, even if these are good and pious and uplifting arguments, so much is the seriousness of the silence that perfect disciples rarely have to be allowed to speak,*
4. *because it is written "In much speech you will not escape sin" 5. and elsewhere: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" 6. If, in fact, it is better for the teacher to speak and instruct, it is up to the disciple to keep quiet and listen.*
7. *If therefore it is necessary to ask the superior something, ask him with all humility and respectful submission.*
8. *Then we condemn the trivialities and idle and exciting words of laughter in all places with eternal exclusion, and that the disciple open his mouth to say such things, we do not allow it.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ina\\_n2DKErA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ina_n2DKErA)

## Medieval reforms

Benedictine monasticism, while remaining the same in its fundamental principles, has adapted to historical needs, renewing itself through many **reforms**.

The first great reform began with the Benedictine abbey of **Cluny**, founded in France at the beginning of the 10th century and which became very important thanks to the abbots Oddone and Ugo. The spirituality of the Clunians is expressed above all in the **solemn celebration of the liturgy**. Many abbeys adhered to this way of life and thus formed a congregation of monasteries that followed the model of Cluny in obedience to his abbot.

The Abbey of Cluny maintains close relations with the Papacy and it was from Cluny that the first plans for the reform of the Church were born, implemented by **Pope Gregory VII** (1073-1085). In Italy too monastic life was renewed: in Grottaferrata, near Rome, the Basilian monks of San Nilo lived between solitude and prayer, which was celebrated in Greek, according to the tradition from which Nile came; in Tuscany the **Camaldolese** of San Romualdo led a life characterized by the contemplative component, which would generate great mystics and theologians.

At the beginning of the 12th century, the orders of the Carthusian monks of St. Bruno and the Cistercians were born in France.



## The Cistercians

In 1098 **St. Robert** left the Cluniac monastery of **Molesme** to found a new abbey with other monks, where to follow the Rule of St. Benedict according to the primitive austerity.

To build the New Monastery, they chose **Cîteaux**, a flat, swampy place called Cistercium in Latin (a place located at Cis tertium lapidem miliarum, i.e. on this side of the third milestone on the road between Langres and Chalon-sur-Saone).

Only after **Alberico**, Roberto's successor, and with the advent of the third abbot, **Stephen Harding**, a great expansion began that was favoured by the brilliant figure of **Bernard of Clairvaux**, who took possession of the Cistercian ideal so much that he was considered the new founder of the order.

The Cistercians, as established in the **Charter of Charity**, the basic text of the Order, live in abbeys united by the **bond of subsidiarity**, a bond of fraternal help through which each abbey, in case of need, is assisted by the others.

## The birth of mendicant orders

With the birth and formation of the Communes (mid-12th century) society changed.

Traditional monasticism went into crisis and new religious movements were born, the most important of which were those founded by **Saint Francis of Assisi** and **Saint Dominic of Guzman**.

The Franciscan and Dominican Orders, born in the first two decades of the thirteenth century, have many traits in common that differentiate them from the monastic experience: they refuse any kind of riches and to live they do not rely on agricultural work, like the orders of Benedictine origin, but on the charity of the faithful; hence the name of mendicant orders.

Franciscans and Dominicans use to call themselves friars, brothers, and not monks, that is, solitary men, and they live in convents, places in which to gather, and not in monasteries, that is, places in which to isolate themselves.

Convents are no longer to be found in places far from inhabited centres, but in the suburbs of the cities, and the architectural structure of the churches, destined to welcome numerous faithful and no longer just the monastic community, is also transformed according to new needs.



### **To conclude a reflection on monasticism**

The monastic concentration around the essential of the common faith: the Word that makes the desert around the cathedrals bloom.

The monastic form challenges the impossibility of the essential. And it puts its risk in what is most common.

The quality of monastic life depends in fact on the strength and immediacy with which it directs the intensity of the gaze and the happiness of the heart around the splendour of the elementary Christian truth on which it is concentrated. From the same Word of God that we also wish to hear and that we seek to understand; the Word that keeps us alive and without which we understand that we cannot live our relationship with the Lord. Of the same Eucharist without which there is no Christian life for anyone. Of the same spiritual wisdom of life that marks the elementary quality of the conversion of faith. Without it, faith - even faith that moves mountains, works miracles to help the poor, and throws its life into flames - does not become for anyone the absolute affection of the heart. That is the agape of God, who saves us.

The timeless interest of the monastic form, together with its Christian singularity, lies precisely in the fact that it makes special the essential, maximum the minimum, exceptional what is most common.

Elementary existence, elementary spirituality. The two things together restore the symbol of the monastic way to its Christian truth. In this exercise of stubbornly returning faith and life to the elementary, and therefore to the essential, the monastic form in turn obtains the restitution of Christian truth to the radical link between *unum necessarium* and the common form of faith. Each time it unlocks the alibi of its impracticability in the normality of the world and of the church. Because it is in the normality of this world and of this church that it opens - by force - the way to restitution to the consciousness of the human impossible, possible to God, who dwells in faith as such. And at the same time it exalts the happiness of the simplest faith, which recognizes the splendor of the Spirit and the strength that dwell in the elementary gifts of faith: the revelation of Jesus Christ and the sacrament, the agape of the *abbà*-God and brotherhood.

The most common is the "proximity" in solidarity with elementary Christianity: living by one's work, cultivating fraternity, keeping oneself alive with the Word of God and the sacrament of the presence/absence - of expectation - of the Lord among his own. Proximity is also achieved at a "distance" from the bonds by which the worldly powers hold him hostage in certain aspects. The unscrupulous removal of monasticism from worldly bonds (and not so much the display of a state of greater constraint, which often appears as the most exciting symbol) is in view of the vigor of a hope that must be strictly common to believers. Nothing and no one can separate us from the love of Christ and from the accomplished destination of the affections worthy of Him.



## Glossary

**Church:** ecclesia, meeting of people; it is a religious building specifically devoted to Christian Religious Worship. In other words, a "Simple Church" is not a Cathedral, Basilica, Monastery and so on. Generally, a Parish has its seat in a "simple" Church. (parish refers to a territorial entity, a community of believers)

**Duomo:** from the Latin domus = house; it is the main church of an urban centre, and it is often also the **Cathedral** of the Diocese. **Cathedral** comes from Cathedra, because it houses the Chair of the Bishop

**Basilica:** since the 5th Century the term Basilica has been used to indicate a building of worship divided into three or five naves and with an apse at the end; in modern times the name basilica is given to those churches that have been awarded this title conferred by the Holy See or that have had it for centuries. They can be "papal" (formerly "patriarchal") or "pontifical", "major" (basilicae maiores; characterized by the presence of the papal throne and altar) or "minor" (basilicae minores). The Duomo of Milan is famous all over the world, and it is simply called Duomo. The exact name is: **Basilica Metropolitan Cathedral of Santa Maria Nascente - Duomo of Milan**. Basilica is the title conferred by the Holy See, Metropolitan as it is located in the metropolis of Milan, cathedral as the bishop's seat, Cathedral as the main church of an urban center.



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**Monastery:** is a common building where a community of monks or nuns lives, under the authority of an abbot or abbess. Monasteries do not constitute a religious order: each of them can be a separate community, or be part of confederations, with some functions of coordination and mutual help.



Subiaco

**Convent:** this term was introduced with the advent of the mendicant orders, whose monks are called "Friars" and "Sisters", that is brothers or sisters.



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**Example:** in Subiaco there is the Monastery of St. Scholastica, founded around 500 by St. Benedict, while in Assisi we speak of the Sacred Convent, as St. Francis founded the first Conventual Orders. In reality, in modern times, the two realities are quite similar, both based on communities characterised by work and prayer and regulated by the Guardian.

**Abbey:** from the late Latin *abbatīa*, "that which belongs to the abbot". Over time it takes on the most extensive meaning of the group of assets that are administered by this religious office. In fact, very often "Abbey" means not only the building itself, but also the settlement that has developed around it, indeed the territory of the Abbey is formed by the buildings and surrounding territories that fall under its control. For example, the Abbey of Montecassino until 2014 was a real diocese, with many municipalities and parishes under its jurisdiction.



s. Urbano (Macerata-Marche)

Currently the situation has changed, through a Motu Proprio of Pope Francis, but the example makes the difference between Abbey and Convent.

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**Sanctuary:** it is a place considered sacred for the manifestation of the divine, for the presence of burials of important people or relics, or because it is connected to events which are considered supernatural. Think of the Franciscan Shrines, places that have seen the presence of the Poor Man of Assisi, or the Shrines of Lourdes and Fatima, where they worship the apparitions of Our Lady.



Oropa (Biella-Piemonte)

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**The Hermitage** (from the Greek ἔρημος *érēmos*) is a place of difficult access, where one or more individuals, called hermits or anchorites retire voluntarily excluding themselves from society, to lead a life of prayer and/or asceticism.



San Colombano (Trento)

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